



The Song Exists in Your Heart: Walking Wurundjeri Country

Written by Declan Fry

1. I am walking on Wurundjeri country. Country that does not belong to me. Although the cats are nice enough.

2. The suburb is Brunswick. But it could be Fitzroy.

3. I am not familiar with the area, but am becoming so.

4. You realise you're getting better acquainted once the small geographies begin to register. The appearance of the houses (almost comically safe and warm). The approach of the intersections (wide, but not country-wide). The way the intersections combine to produce infinite street vistas you cannot see to the end of. The number of trees that are introduced and the number that are native.

5. (Play this last game and you will find you have more luck barracking for the former team.)

6. You think to yourself: Brunswick is just so studiously comfortable. Ivy cladding every aspect of every home.

7. An introduced species, ivy. Like cats and plane trees.

8. How many of the settlers back on Wongatha country were always complaining about the cats while accepting the plane trees?

9. I have begun reading Ellen van Neerven's latest poetry collection, Throat.

10. Halfway through they ask me a question: 'Are you willing to enter an agreement that is incomplete and subject to change?'

11. In other words: will I enter a Treaty with Ellen? An agreement of shared power between them and their readers?

I don't share country with Ellen.

And I am reading their work and writing this essay on country that is not mine.

So I sign up.

12. Ellen van Neerven has a conversational approach. Like walking in on someone talking in the spare room.

in South-East Asia, my appearance

allows queers to feel comfortable

to speak to me openly

about what is not open in their country

But appearances, as the cliché is eager to remind us, can be deceiving.

13. Take Animal Crossing.

14. In Animal Crossing, land does not belong to anyone. (And there is irony here, given how much of my partner's mental landscape the game is swiftly colonising.) Race and class do not exist either.

15. Only this is naive, because of course they do. Animal Crossing is a contemporary product of a capitalist society – so of course they do.

16. One thing that is openly acknowledged in the game is linear time. A clock lies at the bottom of the screen, constantly counting down the minutes.

17. 8:54. 8:55. 8:56.

18. My Twitter feed informs me that the Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong has been building monuments to Hong Kong's independence on Animal Crossing.

19. Days later, screenshots surface on social media of Chinese government supporters erecting monuments to the status quo: one country, two systems.

20. Gramsci was right. Culture is a political battlefield.

21. In 'Invisible Spears', from their debut collection, van Neerven writes:

you don't want us protecting

our land like the Maori

that means it was our land to protect

we don't need

a haka of whitefullas

just let us resist

22. I've always loved that poem.

23. Even if I often wish that the final, overly permissive line, were different. Who needs a whitefulla's blessing to resist?

We have a right.

24. But I think maybe van Neerven has grown, too. Because in Throat, they now write: 'sovereignty was never ceded. why do we need to reference the invasion, we are continuing our ancestors' talk. I can close my eyes and you are gone – that's the power of Country'.

25. There are so many perfect poems we catch ourselves rewriting in our heads. Hoping the outcome will be different this time. Wanting, fingers crossed, for things to be otherwise.

Wishing Frost would head off down the other damn road.

26. In 'Questions of Love', van Neerven writes:

we speak about gender before colonisation

we speak about love before colonisation

Only how do we catch up with this before? How does the future meet up with the present? Is it the ships approaching the shore? Or is it the people on the shore?

27. According to van Neerven, 'created communities are a way to design our futures.'

I'm not sure what that means.

But I think I could learn.

28. I think it is the shore itself. That solid demarcation of country. Particularly when the strength of loneliness that comes from living on unfamiliar country can no longer sustain you.

I'm a long way from Mununjali land

gum leaves under my pillow

smuggled interstate by mouth

they are crinkled and

get smaller each day

29. Who is doing the creating for communities? Who's doing the design? Do we construct our future like Timmah Ball, a Ballardong Noongar urban planner? Or do we do it like Lisa Bellear – like Destiny Deacon?

Maybe we do it like Becca Hatch does in her song '2560': the pulse of the bass, bouncy and coiled; the way the modular Afro-jazz scales of the guitar follow her voice and ascend as she rhythms

brown girl from the suburbs

cropped shirt with the sneakers

reminiscing about growing up in the Campbelltown postcode the song takes its name from.

like you don't understand

like where'd you get that xanax

and chain around your neck

you can't afford

Best kind of postcode justice I've ever heard.

30. Outside my apartment window plants crinkle through fencelines, artfully coiling and navigating their way between the slats.

In my mind their green – that kind of thicklush green – says city city city.

Where I grew up in Kalgoorlie and Laverton, on Wongatha country, everything was red and black and pink. The closest shade to green was the burnished brown emerald of the eucalyptus leaves.

31. I was born in Kalgoorlie in August 1988, Year of the Dragon.

Ellen was born in the Year of the Horse.

Must be roughly two years younger than me.

Growing older you realise: there is never enough time.

Only so many days in a month, you know?

30. In 1968, the American poet AR Ammons wrote something that has haunted me ever since I first came across it.

I dreamed my father flicked

in his grave

then like a fish in water

wrestled with the ground

surfaced and wandered:

I could not find him

through woods, roots, mires

in his bad shape: and

when I found him he was

dead again and had to be

re-entered in the ground:

I said to my mother I still

have you: but out of the
dream I know she died
sixteen years before his
first death:
as I become a child again
a longing that will go away
only with my going grows.

29. I am becoming a child again on Wurundjeri country, alive with longing and endless unease. Anxiety that is probably borne of the sense of not belonging.

Or maybe it's just the ache of watching the days slip through your fingers and feeling like you're not at home and maybe you never will be.

What does it mean to be held

in another

tongue

Bahbuny,

I wanted to speak to you in our language

and tell you I love you

Stars broke

when they heard you died

dust fell at our feet

[...]

Gibam garandalehn,

why you keep me awake

what am I still to do

[...]

Mum says

it sounds like a child wrote it.

Yes, I'm still a child,

I was eleven when Nanny passed.

I do not have adult words.

28. Ellen van Neerven writes about finding a language for experiences you've always had but never known how to voice. Sometimes they'll even tell you as much. 'I used to have a name (for this)', they'll say:

I used to have a name

I want to relax again

'our places' are nothing flash

inner-city Naarm

QV and the kebab shop on Sydney Rd

I'm drawn there as if memory

can save me

as if all I need is

one deep sniff

of you and it'll all be good

tonight my friend called my heart

a marathon runner

and me a chain-smoker who refuses

to quit even when their organs shut

think she meant it

as a compliment?

paths are printed in my blood

when my heart breaks

I'll have the river

And you want to have the river. You want to have the river because its continuous flow is always intermingling with the current of what comes after.

The surprise of the earth. The salt filling your mouth.

27. I step into the river and I am back in Laverton. Wongatha country. The future has not happened yet.

Only I know that this is a lie.

Because sometimes while the future is happening you start to realise that even if you were there when it occurred, you'd probably be too late to catch up with it.

26. Ellen says that they were the only Blak queer in the world. That they 'hadn't yet read Lisa Bellear. And cried sitting on the carpet in the library over sharply written work that spoke to me and my experience.'

It's true: Lisa Bellear changed the game. Shifted people's gaze places it'd never been.

Like Destiny Deacon out in Brunswick, remapping our geographies with her art.

thanks Sis for dropping the 'c'

for us urban blaks you gave us a way to break

free from their expectations define our identity

on our own terms

thanks Sis for taking the white people's invention

putting your blak eye behind the lens

representing us

you know I also feel when I'm sitting on the

couch I am always feeling too much

telling stories sometimes is the only way out

Brunswick Sista wherever you are

lounge living room Island

darkroom gallery lecture hall classroom

you're deadly

Sis too deadly

25. Since high school in Boorloo I have been haunted and often in love with the Flaming Lips song, 'Ego Tripping at the Gates of Hell'.

I was waiting on a moment

But the moment never came

All the billion other moments

Were just slipping all away

Including the moment when I never had the chance to meet Lisa Belleair because it was 2006 and I was in Boorloo and I was just starting university and everything was in its right place except now when I catch myself wondering if it really was.

24. Western thought conceives of time as linear.

That's one way of seeing it.

Another is to understand that everything has already happened.

Including the moment when all this is over – this essay, this life; everything that this is.

23. So: I step into the river.

And I am back on Wongatha country.

A farmer holds a bird in his hand. Damn cats keep killing them, he says.

As far as this farmer was concerned, the local cats were not nice enough.

22. I guess I should tell you that my partner and I have begun an important project – a scientific inquiry. I envisage that our work will be of some value to future generations.

It involves cataloguing all of the cats of Brunswick.

21. Like the stout one with the galvanic tail who traipsed down the curb, inspecting each rain gutter as she did so.

The avid orange number who kept trying to apply her soft paws in ascending my shoulders.

20. There is joy in the ridiculous. In letting go. Moments that feel like the end of the nineties US sitcom where all the family and pets gather together and smile with perfect American teeth and we zoom out from the lounge to the nice landscaped suburbs knowing that this is a fantasy but that it is also perfect in the insistent way that fantasies cannot help being.

19. Life is a river. We step into it and begin to play. Every joy and tragedy intermingling. Like Ali Cobby Eckermann wrote:

sticks

bounce in my hand

one end

following my mother

other end

my child following me

we have the same hurts

make fire

to reconcile

join that song

been there

when we were small

when we were old

tap sticks by the fire

feel like coming home

18. We have one side of the table to tip tap on the laptop and the other to tap sticks

17. On Yorta Yorta country I experience something strange – the sense of being on Wongatha country.

16. It is greener than Kalgoorlie or Laverton here. No denying that. But the woka feels at times like Wongatha woka.

15. Or maybe not the country itself. Maybe just the colonial parts. The wide open aspect of the roads. The Springsteenesque sense of heavy industry permeating everything.

The urban architecture of Kalgoorlie permeates Shepparton, and I have no idea why.

I don't think the folks in Shep do, either.

14. But in other ways the woka does feel different. Memories of Kalgoorlie are marked by width. Red gravel expanse.

The earth smoulders. Even at night – burning with sun.

Nangarna mulana yenbena Kulin. Nangarna mulana Kulin woka.

13. Yorta Yorta country feels more wooded, nestled. It feels like the shed where Allara, a Yorta Yorta musician, is singing.

After the rain

The river flows

And the kookaburras sing

Or like the cello that she plays, hushed woody vibration of bass strings.

12. She dedicates her song to Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network. I remember how the other day they streamed a documentary on social media: Water is Life.

11. Grass punctuates the soil as the gums rise and gather. They stand slightly apart and lopsided. Scrawls of bark trail from the trunks of trees, grey and gritted. Throughout the landscape water intervenes in ways it never does on the drier soil of Wongatha.

Wala is life

Wala falls from the sky

Rain beginning of life

Like our kinship ties

10. They walk with you, those waterways. Gently traversing the country like fingers reaching out to form chords.

Galnya mulana yanyubak – good spirit paths.

And I took the one less...

9. The fires on Yorta Yorta country remind me of pu'er tea. The taste of it.

普洱

People during the Qing dynasty stored and traded its fermented black leaves. Its value increasing over time.

It is the taste of smoke and shadows and earth.

普洱

8. Yorta Yorta gums are spindly thin. The sun glances them easily. Trips through the leaves into the water. Washes across the water like paint.

Wala is Blood

Wala gives flood

Wala is life

Gotta get lore right

Illuminating other landscapes just out of sight, colours fleeing the canvas.

7. In the first, untitled, poem of their collection, van Neerven writes:

Memories sometimes come backwards. They haunt-walk in. My therapist – in our last session together before she left – asked me to describe the creative process. I said a voice to throw belief at. How I sit at one side of the table to tip tap on the laptop and the other to write in my notebook. This morning I faced an identity crisis organising my wardrobe. It is mid-spring and I'm not yet warm. In my home, my Country – now several hundred kilometres north-east from here – the sun sits on my shoulders. Every breath is a loss or gain of water. Here my legs curl to my knees and my throat is always dry.

6. Growing up I never really knew water, apart from when we went to visit Laverton's one swimming pool or we travelled from Kalgoorlie to Boorloo to see the coast down on Whadjuk country. Like Ellen (albeit much less frequently) we were

driving to the sea

once a week

toeing in with caution and curiosity

5. At sunset the water on Yorta Yorta country vanishes to rust and rainbow. Occasional leaves eddy downstream, dancing the waters.

Dragons swim beneath, whirlpools fussing their tails.

Such a sad sight: a ship-shaped hole in the forest

still recovering from the fright of colonisation

the straightest pine cuts into masts

elm into keel and stern post

white oak into hull, floors and futtocks

for the farms: streams of straw and cattle

grazing on the deforested floor.

[...]

in Yugambeh our names for boat and

tree that makes the boat are the same

material handled with care

spirit lives

in the same name

so do I call you tree or mast

as I walk through the wood

full of so many ship-shaped holes?

4. Small tides agitate the shore, whispering

maloga maloga maloga

The canoe trees turning grey

sand sand sand

Creak of the river percussive

clap, clap, clap

3. Allara picks up her clapsticks.

Rhythm trees. Canoe trees. Ghost gums. Scar trees.

Bunjil looking on behind her.

Steely eagle eyes.

And Ellen is speaking outside

breeze

flows

leaves

fall

smoke

curls

love fuels

our step

tread lightly

like a bird

walk to water

speak in footprints

together

listen

break

heal

tap

write

bleed

living loving

on sacred land

Clapsticks tapping a rhythmic staccato. Clicking beak echoes.

clapsticks ring syllables of song

the song lives in the eagle flying overhead

watch for the glint of light from its wing

as it turns in tune with the sun

do not flinch away from angels

they come to appraise the song

in the amphitheatre of our mouths

and the inflation of our hearts

the rightful season is now

sing your love toward the sky

play them clapsticks my sister

the song exists in your heart

That's Ali Cobby Eckermann again, by the way. Not Ellen.

Sometimes you need to let a few other songs in.

2. Before Ellen goes, they tell me:

We sat up singing. Covering our feet from the cold.

The sand I carry in my heart is hot. The

shadows are wet.

My heritage is to honour those in my

blood. We will not tire now. The song

will keep going in us.

1. I am walking on Wurundjeri country. Country that does not belong to me. Although the cats are nice enough.